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Cryogenic fluid tank and use in a motor vehicle

The present invention relates to cryogenic fluid tanks, in particular liquid cryogen tanks, of the type comprising an inner casing arranged in an outer casing with a vacuum insulation space positioned in between, the casings having a flattened, for example parallelepipedal, general configuration.

For reasons of installability, vehicle-borne tanks, particularly those in motor vehicles, are required to have flattened shapes which do not have the same advantageous mechanical stability properties as the spherical or cylindrical shapes conventionally used for the storage of pressurized fluids. Moreover, vehicle-borne tanks must be capable of withstanding high transverse accelerations, a factor which creates problems with regard not only to the mechanical stability of the casings but also to their assembly with one another, the latter problem being further complicated by the questions of heat exchange between the two casings.

The specific object of the present invention is to provide a liquid cryogenic fluid tank structure having a double casing and combining high mechanical strength with very light weight.

To make this possible, according to one feature of the invention the tank comprises at least one hollow tubular structure which connects the two main faces of the inner casing and in which there extends at least one rigid linking element connecting the two main faces of the outer casing, and at least two flexible linking elements respectively connecting a main face of the outer casing to a main face of the inner casing.

According to other features of the invention:

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- each flexible linking element connects a main face of one casing to the opposed main face of the other casing,

5 - the flexible linking elements are mounted under tension in tension between end swivel fittings,

- the tank comprises a plurality of flexible linking elements angularly distributed around the rigid linking element.

10 The present invention also relates to the use of such a tank for the storage of a liquid cryogen used as a power source in a motor vehicle.

15 Other features and advantages of the present invention will emerge from the following description of an embodiment, given by way of illustration but with no limitation being implied, with reference to the appended drawings, in which:

20 - figure 1 is a schematic view in partial vertical section of a tank according to the invention having a parallelepipedal general configuration;

- figure 2 is a perspective view of one half of an inner casing;

25 - figure 3 is a perspective view of one half of an outer casing; and

- figure 4 is a perspective view of a system shown in figure 1 for supporting the inner casing in the outer casing.

30 Figure 1 is a schematic representation (the thicknesses of the walls are not to scale) of a portion of an inner storage casing, generally designated by the reference 1, arranged in an outer casing, generally designated by the reference 2, a vacuum insulation space 3 being formed between the two casings 1 and 2.

In the embodiment represented, the casings 1 and 2 have a parallelepipedal general configuration, as can

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clearly be seen from figures 2 and 3, with each of the main faces, 4a and 4b in the case of the inner casing 1 and 5a, 5b in the case of the outer casing 2, being situated opposite one another.

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The main faces have at least one pair of mutually opposite coaxial orifices, typically two pairs in the examples represented, denoted by 6 in the case of the walls of the inner casing 1 and by 7 in the case of the 10 walls of the outer casing.

The orifices 6 of the inner casing 1 have mounted within them, typically by plasma welding, annular end rings 8 of an inner tubular structure 9 providing a 15 rigid connection between the main faces 4a and 4b of the inner casing 1 and through which there extends a central tube 10 which continues on both sides into the intermediate vacuum space 3 and which is fastened, by welding, at its ends to shoulders 11 in the mutually opposite planar faces of cylindrical cups 12 mounted, typically by plasma welding, in the mutually opposite 20 orifices 7 of the main faces 5a and 5b of the outer casing 2.

25 As can be seen more clearly from figure 4, the bases of the cups 7 and the rings 8 have respective orifices 13, 14 which allow the passage of ties 15 and serve externally for housing swivel fittings 16 for fastening and clamping these ties 15 under tension.

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According to the invention, and as can clearly be seen from figures 1 and 4, the rigid linking tubes 9 and 10 ensure that each casing is able to take up stresses applied to the main faces of the inner and outer 35 enclosures, and the ties 15 each have one end connected to a main face (for example 5a) of the outer casing (via the cup 12) and the other end connected to the opposed main face (in this example: 4b) of the outer

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casing 1 (via the ring 8). The inner casing is thus completely suspended in the outer casing, any vertical displacement between the casings being prohibited, any lateral displacement between the casings likewise being 5 prohibited by doubling the supporting system as in the example represented.

As represented in figures 2 and 3, the casings 1 and 2 are ribbed so as to increase their rigidity, and the 10 inner casing 1 has internally a series of vertical parallel partitions 17 reinforced by bosses 18 and making it possible for emptying operations to be performed on the tank without causing the latter to subside, the partitions extending longitudinally over 15 most of the length of the casing 1 and forming spaces for the tubular structures 9.

As will be understood, with the arrangement which has just been described, the tendencies of the casings 1 and 2 to collapse are counteracted in compression by the rigid spacers 9 and 10, respectively, while the tendencies of the inner casing 1 to swell by virtue of the pressure differentials across its walls are counteracted in tension which is equally distributed by 25 the ties 15 while preserving the "floating" nature of the casing 1.

For storage applications of liquid cryogenic fuel, such as liquefied natural gas or hydrogen, in motor vehicles, the casings 1 and 2 are advantageously made 30 of stainless steel having a thickness below 4 mm, typically below 3 mm, in the form of two forged half-shells assembled via their meridian plane parallel to the main faces 4 and 5. The linking tubes 9 and 10, the 35 rings 8 and the cups 7 are likewise advantageously composed of stainless steel and the ties 15 are advantageously composed of strands of nonmetallic, typically glass, fibers in an epoxy, having a diameter

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not exceeding 5 mm. In this embodiment, three ties 15 tensioned between the faces 5a and 4b and three ties tensioned between the faces 5b and 4a are provided in an alternating angular arrangement around the tube 10.

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Although the invention has been described in relation to a specific embodiment, it is not limited thereto but is open to modifications and variants which will become apparent to a person skilled in the art within the 10 scope of the claims which follow. In particular, the tank may, according to the requirements of installation in situ, have other flattened shapes, for example the shape of a disk which is at least partially axisymmetrical, optionally oblong, or segmented in the 15 form of petals.